

U.S.S. Duxbury Bay, AVP-38

Journeys with a seaplane tender

This is the first in a three-part series.

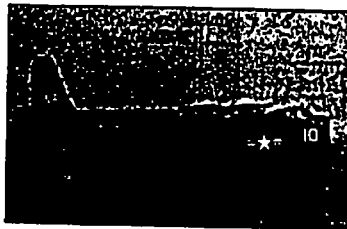
By JOE SHEA

At the outbreak of World War II, the United States Navy understood that the war in the Pacific Theater would involve a great deal of island hopping, and that water-based long-range seaplanes would be the fastest and most suitable for the task.

The principal large seaplane was the PBY (PB for Patrol Bomber; Y was the identifier assigned by the builder). It was a twin-engine seaplane with high wings and retractable wheels that would allow it to land on a runway if necessary. It was an excellent search plane due in part to the large bubble windows on the side of the fuselage. It would climb, descend, cruise, takeoff and land at 90 knots. It could land in the open ocean to rescue downed pilots and survivors of sunken ships. There was also the newer PBM. It was to provide these aircraft with services that seaplane tenders were developed.

At the opening of the war, seaplane tenders were large ships and there were only a few in commission. Some were 340 feet long and displaced up to 12,000 tons. They had complements of over 1,000 men and could lift two seaplanes onto the fantail and work on both at the same time. They had full aviation machine shops on board, but what was also needed was a smaller, more agile ship that could tend to the needs of a seaplane squadron other than heavy maintenance. These were called AVPs; there were 13 AVPs before the war and, another 46 were ordered into production during the war. Tenders of both sizes would rendezvous with the PBYs and other smaller seaplanes in protected bodies of water to refit, refuel and rearm the planes.

Seaplane tenders at that time were named



A seaplane awaiting refueling.

Official photograph of U.S. Navy.

after protected bodies of water. When the time came to determine names for the new class of smaller ships, the Navy consulted some hydrographic charts, and among others picked out the name Duxbury Bay. Other east coast names used were Casco, Chincoteague, Rehoboth, Rockaway, Greenwich Bay and Biscayne.

The USS Duxbury Bay, AVP-38, was of the smaller class of seaplane tenders. She was a Barnegat Class AVP of which 46 were ordered during the war. Thirty-three were finished before production ended at the end of the war. Fifteen of these were turned over to the United States Coast Guard for use as cutters as the war wound down. Some of these saw long service up to and including the Vietnam war.

The Duxbury Bay was 310 feet nine inches long and 41 feet two inches wide. She drew 13 feet six inches of water and displaced 1,766 tons. Top speed was 18 knots. She had a complement of 215 men. She was built in the Lake Washington Shipyard in Houghton, Washington and launched on October 2, 1944. Lake Washington was a fresh water lake that gave access to the ocean via a series of locks into Puget Sound.

The Navy put a skeleton crew aboard the ship for security purposes before it was commissioned on December 31, 1944. One sailor from Cape Cod was part of that small group.



The U.S.S. Duxbury Bay in wartime camouflage colors. Official photograph of U.S. Navy.

They were issued one .45 caliber pistol, which they were to share. They stood guard 24/7 over a black painted metal box on the bridge. Their instructions were to shoot anyone who touched that box. It was only after the full ship's crew came aboard that they found out they were guarding a new advanced and very secret radar set. When the ship left the shipyard she was painted in a camouflage pattern she would retain for the war.

During the war, students in the Duxbury school system wrote to the sailors aboard ship. It was a real morale boost according to a crewman I spoke to, Hank Collins, radioman first class, who still remembered the letters 57 years later.

The Duxbury Bay moved down the California coast for her first operational training, which she finished with flying colors. In March of 1945 she sailed from San Diego to Pearl Harbor, thence onward to Eniwetok and Ulithi atolls via Midway Island and Guam where she serviced planes. Then it was on to Kerama Retto off Okinawa where she participated in operations to subdue Okinawa. There she was involved in the largest seaplane operation ever conducted. As a part of the United States Third Fleet, most of which were moored in Kerama Retto, there were an estimated 110 seaplanes based at the seadrome and serviced by at least 11 seaplane tenders. In addition to providing moorings for the big planes, the Duxbury Bay would float gasoline hoses on the surface of the water to refuel the planes. The small boats of the Duxbury Bay served as water taxis as they carried men and supplies between the ship and aircraft.

It was at Kerama Retto that the ship saw first combat operations. Japanese kamikaze attacks were a constant threat and too often successful. The kamikaze attacks went on for weeks. Another threat was enemy swimmers from the many small islands looking to do damage to either planes or ships. Despite the ability of many of our ships to make obscuring smoke, an estimated 68 ships in the area experienced damage from the airborne attacks. One crewman reported that at times the obscuring smoke was so thick they never saw the attacking planes. On May 6 the Duxbury Bay suffered her only combat loss of the war. Chief Quartermaster R.C. Nixon was killed at his battle station by shrapnel during a kamikaze attack.

In July 1945 Duxbury Bay moved to what is now called Buckner Bay on the east side of Okinawa. Here she served as the Fleet Post Office, mail tender and gasoline supplier to many of the small craft in the area. Mail from home would travel by seaplane to the Duxbury Bay and be distributed by her small boats to the other ships and forces in the area.

While the Duxbury Bay was in Okinawa waters, Typhoon Louise passed and subjected the fleet to a beating. The typhoon produced winds of 100 knots with gusts to 120. Fifty-three ships were damaged so badly they were stripped and abandoned. Duxbury Bay survived, but crewman Hank Collins said he will never forget the ride.

Joe Shea is a retired commander, United States Naval Reserve.

A Ship Named USS Duxbury Bay Post War

By JOE SHEA

This is the second in a three-part series.

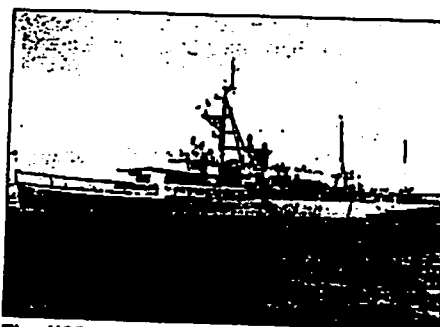
At the end of the war, the *USS Duxbury Bay* was sent to Jinsen, Korea for peacekeeping operations. She served in the Far East tending patrol squadrons at Shanghai and Tsingtao, China; and Hong Kong, British Crown Colony, until returning to San Francisco in October 1946. At war's end she reverted to the more familiar navy gray paint job on the hull.

The period from war's end to 1950 saw the *Duxbury Bay* do two tours in the Far East, including duty again at Okinawa and Yokosuka, Japan. *Duxbury Bay* was now servicing the largest seaplane in our inventory, the new P5M Marlin. In early 1949 she left the Pacific operating area through the Indian Ocean around the tip of Africa, thence to her new home at Norfolk, Virginia. This trip was an "around the world cruise." The fall of 1949 found her conducting cold weather seaplane operations in the first ever flight operation in the harbor at Halifax, Nova Scotia supported by a seaplane tender. That exercise marked the end of her career supporting aircraft operations.

The advent of the atomic bomb led to the Navy ultimately phasing out all seaplane operations. In response to the Strategic Air Command's threat to rule the air and make the Navy obsolete, the Navy brass launched a program to compete. In 1957 I was selected to train to fly the hot new all-jet seaplane to be known as the P6M SeaMaster. It was to be a nuclear capable seaplane that could hide from ICBM missiles in many places on the world's oceans. It was to be serviced by submarines modified to haul jet fuel. This was at the peak of the Cold War, even before the Berlin Wall went up. About one dozen of the P6Ms were built, but the program fell victim to being too far ahead of its time and the Navy put all their energy into other weapons systems. The decision was made in 1958 to slow development of the P6M and in 1960 to wind down current operations of all of the seaplanes in the U.S. Navy. I never got to fly one.

Diplomacy

The next 15 years saw *Duxbury Bay* in the role of command ship and as a protocol platform from which the United States could practice diplomacy and "show the flag" all over the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Three ships, the *USS Duxbury Bay* AVP-38, *USS Greenwich Bay* AVP-41 and *USS Valcour* AVP-55 were refitted for diplomatic duty and painted white in the process. In the course of the refit the aviation gasoline tanks were converted to engine fuel tanks, thus giving the ship extraordinary range and ability to operate alone. The former aviation storage spaces provided voluminous storage for foodstuffs and other supplies. Other than hospital ships, they were the only ships in the post war Navy painted white. The lack of air conditioning was significant when the ambient temperatures often exceeded 110 degrees. The three ships rotated duty in the Middle East. The British were pulling out of the Persian Gulf



The *USS Duxbury Bay* was painted white for diplomatic duty.

Official U.S. Navy photograph

area and the U.S. did not want Russia filling the gap. In 1953, King Ibn Saud of Saudi called the U. Navy in the area the "Bedouins of the Sea." The *Duxbury Bay* was known as the "Galloping Ghost of the Persian Coast" for the many trips and port visits up and down the Persian Gulf and the unusual white color. In deference to the prohibitions on alcohol in many of the Arabian countries, beer for the crew was stored on board and only issued when the ship could locate an uninhabited island on which to grant the crew liberty. They were always able to find one.

Duxbury Bay transported dignitaries to conferences, including His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and his matched pair of pet Cheetahs. In 1953 Emperor Selassie gave the crew nearly a ton of Ethiopian coffee beans which, when divided, gave each crewmember almost four pounds of exotic coffee beans.

Just before Christmas 1961 the *Duxbury Bay* entered the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers known as the Shat-al-Arab to steam up river to the port of Basra, Iraq. It was the first time American forces visited Basra. After diplomatic honors were exchanged, the crew competed with the locals in soccer and basketball. The sailors narrowly lost both contests but enjoyed the competition.

Jim Queeny of Beaverbrook Road remembers seeing pictures of the ship with Persian carpets covering the decks. One sheik to be transported would not enter a small boat, thus requiring several very difficult dockings in shallow bays in Saudi Arabia. In 1963, the same sheik, after noticing that the crew did not wear wristwatches, presented every crewmember with one. High level guests would often bring sheep and goats with them in addition to a retinue of retainers.

When the *Duxbury Bay* came home to Norfolk, Virginia for refit, there was often little rest. This was when new crewmen came aboard and new equipment was installed. Home leave and training schools kept all hands busy. In time it was necessary to go to sea and test the crew to insure they were up to current standards before deploying back to the Middle East. This testing was routinely conducted at "GTMO," Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Joe Shea is a retired commander, United States Naval Reserve.

The USS Duxbury Bay - Gone to the Scrap Heap

By JOE SHEA

This is the third in a three-part series.

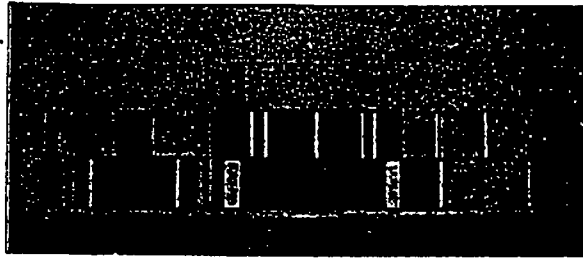
Missile Crisis

In news that shocked the world, Russian missiles were discovered on the island of Cuba only 90 miles from the United States mainland. In October 1962, the *Duxbury Bay* evacuated 341 dependents from the naval base at Guantanamo to Norfolk. The evacuees were told to leave the house keys on the dining room table and wait outside for a bus. That evacuation was so sudden that the dependents had no warm clothing to wear in the chill fall season of Norfolk. A replenishment from an ocean-going tugboat was organized on short notice, transferring on the high seas clothing donated by the people on bases around Norfolk and 40 gallons of fresh milk for the children. A total of four ships evacuated 2,800 non-combatant men, women and children in one day. The crisis eased and most of them were able to return home to GTMO before Christmas.

Changing World

The world changed and bigger ships took up the mission of diplomacy in the Middle East and Persian Gulf. The *Duxbury Bay*, originally built to last the war, had simply worn out, and her missions were achieved by other means. In her 22 years of service she received many awards, citations and campaign ribbons. In order of precedence they are China Service (extended); Navy Expeditionary Service Medal (Cuba); American Campaign Medal; Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal; World War II Victory Medal; Navy Occupation Service Medal (with Asia Clasp) and the National Defense Service Medal.

During those 22 years *Duxbury Bay* transited the Pacific Ocean at least three times and the Atlantic at least 10 times. *Duxbury Bay* also spent a lot of time in the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The



Joe Shea's gift to the Town of Duxbury depicts the medals that the *USS Duxbury Bay* earned during her career. Naval vessels often had large painted boards mounted on the side of the ship's bridge to display their medals. This is a miniature version.

Mediterranean and the Sea of Japan were home for a while. She sailed around the world and around the African continent. Eventually the decision was made to send *Duxbury Bay* to the ship-breakers.

Decommissioning

The Town of Duxbury was notified of the pending decommissioning in the event they wished to participate. The late William (Bill) Nash and his wife, of Surplus Street, were on holiday in the area and were contacted to see if they might be able to attend on behalf of the Town. Bill had served as president of the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society from 1963-65. He arranged for the Navy to ship to the DR&HS the ship's wheel, bell, builders plaque, a life preserver, a brass nameplate and a group of framed photographs. The life preserver went missing for many years and turned up mounted on the wall in the Duxbury Room at the present library.

The DR&HS stored and displayed these "relics" as the Navy called them for about 20 years. All relics have to be inventoried and accounted for every year. All of these items are still owned by the US Navy. In 1986 the late Fred Potter, then president of the DR&HS, returned all of the relics to the Navy except the ship's bell, and the brass nameplate, custody of which had been transferred to the Town of Duxbury in 1976. That transfer was approved by the Navy and the Town now has to account to the Navy for the bell each year. In the event the Navy ever commissions another ship with our

name on it, the Navy reserves the right to recall the bell to active service. The bell is prominently displayed in the central rotunda at Town Hall.

On April 29, 1966 in a formal ceremony aboard the Naval Base, Norfolk, Virginia the *USS Duxbury Bay*, AVP-38 was decommissioned as a fighting vessel in the United States Navy. The commissioning pennant and the national ensign were removed. The crew was dismissed and the vessel was then turned over to the commander of the Norfolk Group, US Atlantic Reserve Fleet for disposal. In July 1967 the *US Duxbury Bay*, AVP-38 was sold to a scrap metal dealer for \$48,900.

Judy Johnson Foote of Congress Street remembers that all the students in the Duxbury schools observed a moment of silence in honor of the ship at the precise time the ceremony was being conducted.

In recognition of the decommissioning, the Duxbury Board of Selectmen participated in "suitable services" at a ceremony on the "Long Bridge." That bridge is the 1/2-mile long wooden bridge that crosses Duxbury Bay now known as the Powder Point Bridge. In typical naval tradition, a memorial wreath was dropped on the outgoing tide. A number of residents and several sailors from the crew of the *Duxbury Bay* attended. The sailors were later taken on the grand tour of town and made to feel welcome.

Joe Shea is a retired commander, United States Naval Reserve.